New Study: Higher speed limits cost lives -- with commentary by Jan Lundberg

Contributed by Drive 55 Leaders
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A unique, authoritative national study has quantified the huge extra number of highway crash deaths since the national speed limit of 55 miles per hour was trashed. The lead author gutsily compares this to the fraction of people killed in the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. First, a short pertinent story by Jan Lundberg:

"Captain Kirk, it is illogical for a 4,000 pound machine to carry around a 150 pound creature as a matter of habit." Thus spake Spock, who provoked this question: Is U.S. society anti-life, as in a science fiction movie? Consider the plausibility of a Star Trek episode in which The Enterprise's crew land on a world who's most powerful nation brags about valuing life more than other nations -- but then needlessly permits highway death, toxification of the food and water, and altering the atmosphere to destroy the climate. Our rational space travelers scratch their heads and speculate that enemies have forced this state of affairs on the planet.

It is finally revealed by a homeless, car-less native to Captain Kirk that profit and blindly following the elite's wishes are really what rule the strange land. Finally Spock chimes in with, "This is clearly a mutation of the civilization that takes over when people give up on nature." "Spock, you're right. Beam us up Scotty!"

Peak Oil Review's editor Tom Whipple has said for years that we'll know oil is taken seriously when the speed limit is reinstated back to 55 miles per hour. Besides the death and additional pollution (the optimum speed of a car is about 45 MPH), there's the urban sprawl destroying the farmland, the diseases from motor exhaust killing about 100,000 U.S. citizens annually, contribution to oil wars, and the sedentary lifestyle causing heart fatalities and medical costs many times over the number directly killed in crashes. In 2008 crash deaths were "only" 37,313 -- the lowest level since 1961 due to the recession and $4-a-gallon gasoline.

Dr. McCoy says upon his shipmates' energizing, "So, Jim and Spock, how did those poor, confused people like your suggestion to reverse economic growth and go back the elegant Victorian days of bicycles and sailing ships?" "Bones, we were about to be locked away and forced to take anti-depressant drugs made at oil refineries. So we put a vial of that virus from Ecotopia into the water supply and escaped! Maybe even the Drive 55 Leaders will succumb."

Drive 55 Conservation Project

by Tim Castleman

The repeal of the federal speed control law in 1995 has resulted in an increase in road fatalities and injuries, according to researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health.

The research is published in the September issue of the American Journal of Public Health. It is the first long-term study to evaluate the impact of repealing the National Maximum Speed Law on road fatalities and injuries in fatal crashes between 1995 and 2005.

The law, which restricted the maximum speed limit to 55 mph on all interstate roads in the United States, was initiated in 1974 in response to the oil embargo and had an immediate impact.

"During the first year there was a drop of almost 17 percent in fatalities after the speed laws were reduced to 55 miles per hour," said Lee Friedman, assistant research professor of environmental and occupational health sciences at UIC and lead author of the study.

The law was modified in 1987 and allowed states to raise the legal speed limits to 65 mph on some interstates. In 1995, the federally mandated 55 mph speed law was revoked, allowing states to set their own speed laws.

"The primary finding of our study was that over the 10-year period following the repeal of National Maximum Speed Law, there were approximately 12,500 deaths due to the increased speed limits across the U.S.," said Friedman.

The researchers used a mixed-regression model to take into account when the speed limits changed in each state and the different characteristics within and between each state, such as car volume density, population density, variations in fleet sizes, the types of vehicles on the road, vehicle quality (newer vehicles versus older vehicles), as well as driver characteristics.

The primary flaw of previous studies has been that they have only focused on selected states or regions, said Friedman, or they have used a simple analysis to look at before versus after implementation of the law during a very short period of time.

The researchers suggest that policy makers reevaluate national policy on speed and road safety and consider reduced speed limits and improved enforcement with speed camera networks to save lives.

Speed camera programs have been implemented in England, France and Australia and have shown immediate reductions in motor vehicle crash fatalities, said Friedman.

"This is a failed policy because it was, in essence, an experiment over 10 years. People assumed that increasing the speed limit would not have an impact," said Friedman. "We've shown that something has happened and it's quite dramatic."

Friedman uses the example of the 3,000 people who died in the September 11th terrorist attacks.

"That tragic event has led to a whole foreign policy," he said. "We estimate that approximately 12,500 people died as a result of a policy to deregulate speed enforcement -- four times what happened on September 11th -- and yet changing the policy to reduce speed limits may be very difficult."

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Friedman's co-authors are Donald Hedeker, UIC School of Public Health, and Elihu Richter, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

An extended interview as MP3 audio file is available here at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Photographs of Lee Friedman are available upon request.

UIC ranks among the nation's top 50 universities in federal research funding and is Chicago's largest university with 25,000 students, 12,000 faculty and staff, 15 colleges and the state's major public medical center. A hallmark of the campus is the Great Cities Commitment, through which UIC faculty, students and staff engage with community, corporate, foundation and government partners in hundreds of programs to improve the quality of life in metropolitan areas around the world.

For more information about UIC, visit www.uic.edu

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